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Abstract

Critics who seek reasons for the suicide of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, 1 are faced with two problems. The first is the cultural enigma the suicide presents to critics who are foreign to the pre-colonial Igbo culture that Achebe presents. The second is literary: how to deal with the irony the event presents, for it is baffling and most unexpected that Okonkwo who, in the past, has demonstrated an incredible amount of courage and determination in facing his enemies (including himself) would consider suicide as a viable solution to the problems of the final moments of his life.

A Cultural Note on Okonkwo's Suicide

Critics who seek reasons for the suicide of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*,¹ are faced with two problems. The first is the cultural enigma the suicide presents to critics who are foreign to the pre-colonial Igbo culture that Achebe presents. The second is literary: how to deal with the irony the event presents, for it is baffling and most unexpected that Okonkwo who, in the past, has demonstrated an incredible amount of courage and determination in facing his enemies (including himself) would consider suicide as a viable solution to the problems of the final moments of his life.

Some critics have sought an explanation in the works of social scientists² as a way of dealing with both problems. However, it is my contention in this paper that the text itself contains answers to the cultural and literary problems. In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate how the Igbo cultural beliefs, fully explained by Achebe in the novel, can help a careful reader to find motives for Okonkwo's shocking suicide.

Throughout the novel Achebe explains that personal achievements and piety are the basic qualifications that anyone who calls himself a *man* in Umuofia must possess. Piety as it is used in Umuofia does not just mean 'reverence for God or devout fulfillment of religious obligations'; its meaning includes 'dutiful respect or regard for parents, homeland',³ and elders who represent the deceased ancestors. Obviously Okonkwo is an achiever who also shows signs of piety. Therefore he deserves anything but the contemptible death by suicide which leads to his being buried like a dog; but his case is a proof of the maxim, 'Character is fate'.

In terms of achievement (that is before his exile),

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had

taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. (pp. 7-8)

Apart from explaining here what things constitute greatness in Umuofia, the author gives us another hint at why Okonkwo will eventually choose to die suddenly. That is, since achievement is revered and because his father died without it, Okonkwo's fear of failure motivates him to pursue achievement with a religious fervour. Having tasted the joys and glory of achievements up until the time he goes into exile, he considers his failure to achieve as failure in life when he returns to Umuofia. Thus, achievement is Okonkwo's life-spring; deny him achievement and you destroy the life in him:

His life had been ruled by a great passion — to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting. (p. 119)

While achievement is what motivates everything Okonkwo does, it also serves as a means of demonstrating his patriotism. His personal victories at wars and wrestling matches earn his clan the epithet, *Umuofia obodo dike*, 'Umuofia the land of the brave' (p. 109). Okonkwo's military achievements made it easy for his clan to obtain quick restitution (of the ill-fated lad Ikemefuna and a young virgin) for the wife of Ogbuefi Udo murdered by Mbaino:

And so when Okonkwo of Umuofia arrived at Mbaino as the proud and imperious emissary of war, he was treated with great honour and respect, and two days later he returned home with a lad of fifteen and a young virgin.... Okonkwo was, therefore, asked on behalf of the clan to look after him in the interim. (p. 12)

It is the clan that sends him to Mbaino and after he makes his report, they are satisfied that the mission has been executed correctly. Neither the gods nor the people are displeased with his exploits so far.

In contrast, when Okonkwo beats up his wife during the Week of Peace, he is reprimanded by Ezeani, the priest of Ani, for Okonkwo's act is so 'abominable' that it 'can ruin the whole clan'. Having been told the enormity of his thoughtless act, Okonkwo is repentant; therefore, he does as the priest asks him to do by taking to the shrine of Ani the next day 'one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries' for a cleansing ritual. This is the first proof of his religious piety.

When Obguefi Ezeudu warns him to refrain from taking part in the killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is headstrong and 'bears a hand' in the killing of a boy who calls him father. When his friend, Obierika, confronts him with the senseless killing, Okonkwo gives an explanation which amounts to a subterfuge:

'You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die.' ... 'But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then?' ... 'The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger', Okonkwo said. 'A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.' (pp. 60-61)

This explanation, which Okonkwo presents as evidence of his piety to Ani and the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, fails to persuade Obierika; the omniscient reporter is not deceived by it either since he reports, 'Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak' (p. 55). In essence, Okonkwo's explanation to Obierika is an example of how people can use religious practices as a pretext that enables them to pursue private and individual ambitions. We discover Okonkwo's hoax because Achebe's thematic and artistic techniques reveal it to us: from the beginning of the novel, the novelist lets us into Okonkwo's mind so we can know what motivates his particular actions. As Obierika rightly points out to him, the Oracle did not specifically ask Okonkwo to be the one to kill his adopted son. Neither did the people. For the second time Okonkwo commits an 'abominable' act which warrants the warning from Obierika: 'What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families' (pp. 60-61). Artistically the warning foreshadows the destruction and exile that follow Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son.

By killing his adopted son, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo has committed the highest crime, the killing of a kinfolk. But unlike the first abomination of desecrating the Week of Peace, he fails to atone for his sin with a sacrifice. He recognizes his mistakes and fasts for two days before resuming his normal duties in the clan; but that is not enough atonement. Blood has been spilt and it should be redeemed with blood — the blood of animals if the sacrifice is voluntarily offered or human blood if the gods demand it. By intuition Okonkwo is tempted to do more than just fast, but again for fear of being thought weak he suppresses the feeling with the following monologue:

'When did you become a shivering old woman', Okonkwo asked himself, 'you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.' (p. 59)

The omniscient goddess, Ani, overhears him and is very certain now (if ever she was deluded) that Okonkwo kills not because he is carrying out ritual process, but because he wants to prove to his fellow elders and to himself that he is not a *woman* like his father Unoka, who could not stand the sight of blood. Later in the novel the inevitable happens:

The drums and the dancing began again and reached fever-heat. Darkness was around the corner, and the burial was near. Guns fired the last salute and the cannon rent the sky. And then from the centre of the delirious fury came a cry of agony and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the centre of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. (p. 112)

Okonkwo has inadvertently committed a crime. It is a female crime because it has been inadvertent. He must flee from the clan because the crime is against the earth goddess.

Achebe uses the most sensitive imagery to describe Okonkwo's calamity: 'He had been cast out of his clan like a fish onto the dry, sandy beach, panting.' First, what the dry, sandy beach is to the fish (a foreign, unnatural and uninhabitable place) is what Mbanta is to the exiled Okonkwo. Not only is Okonkwo not used to the customs of the people, he considers the men of Mbanta as 'effeminate' (p. 140). Second, the word 'panting' reinforces the trauma and desperation concomitant with exile. In a 'panting' situation, only a second person or party can save a victim. As we learn later on in the novel, it takes the combined efforts of Uchendu and Obierika to put Okonkwo back on the track before he can run towards his goal of becoming one of the lords of his clan. Without the material and moral help of both men, it would have been impossible for Okonkwo to cope with the forlornness and despair that have begun to dominate his life, a forlornness and despair that come through in Okonkwo's thought, 'Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things' (p. 119).

When we place this authorial comment against what was said earlier on in the novel, when things were working well for Okonkwo ('Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things'), there seems to be a contradiction. But it appears so because only a few people realize that Okonkwo kills a

kinfolk when he murders his adopted son, Ikemefuna. In addition, Okonkwo thinks to himself that no one knows his real motive when he deals the killing blow of his machete on the sacrificial lad. Aní who sees in secret punishes Okonkwo openly by involving him in an accident in which he kills Ezeudu's son — an incident that unsettles him for life:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan.... That night he collected his most valuable belongings into head-loads. His wives wept bitterly and their children wept with them without knowing why....

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo has polluted with the blood of a clansman. (p. 113)

This way, the prophetic warnings from Ezeani and Obierika are fulfilled. Nearly all that makes Okonkwo an achiever is wiped out. He is to make a new start in life in exile.

Although Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's son is inadvertent, it is no accident that Achebe makes the victim the son of Ezeudu, the very old man who goes to warn Okonkwo against taking part in the killing of Ikemefuna. He says to Okonkwo:

'Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father.' (p. 51)

On the surface, one might regard Ezeudu's warning as helpful since it is intended to save Okonkwo from committing the murder of his adopted son, an act which one believes earns Okonkwo the wrath of Aní. But a closer look at the episode reveals, however, that the warning has dangerous consequences for both Ezeudu who gives it and Okonkwo who flouts it. Considering the ruling passion of Okonkwo's life, to tell Okonkwo that Umuofia had decided to kill Ikemefuna following the pronouncement of their oracle is to excite the warrior into action. You don't tempt a dog with a bone. Even though he can see reason in the warning, he fears what other elders might say if he fails to show up for the ritual killing. In addition, the prior information removes the element of surprise capable of disarming him if he learns of the people's decision without warning.

Ezeudu's action towards Okonkwo makes him a tempter who tempts

an unguarded victim with what he loves most; he provides Okonkwo with the opportunity to prove his manliness through the ritual killing which takes him a step further towards achieving his goal of becoming a lord of the clan. To the people, but not to their goddess Ani, Ezeudu is an unknown traitor because he goes one day ahead of the commissioned lords to divulge the secret of the people and their oracle. However well Ezeudu means, his meeting with Okonkwo is treacherous to the people. We can fully appreciate the gravity of the offense if we imagine what could happen if the warning is given to a less pious and less power-hungry person than Okonkwo; such a person could panic and so reveal the secret to Ikemefuna who could run away. To the humanist the lad's escape is desired, but we are talking about the religious well-being of the people which is at stake. Can it be imagined what would have happened had Jesus been assisted by a traitor of the people to escape Calvary? Although it is painful to think of an innocent child being killed for ritual purposes, yet the killing of Ikemefuna is believed to bring stability to the society and spiritual well-being to the people. Hence, in the traditional Igbo religious beliefs Ikemefuna becomes a sacrificial lamb, therefore a saviour.

It is in this context that Ezeudu, whose warning would have prevented the sacrifice if heeded by Okonkwo, merits the condemnation of the people had they known what he did. In fact, if Okonkwo was not there to deal the killing blow of his machete, Ikemefuna would have been wounded but not killed (p. 55); thus the ritual process would not have been complete. On the other hand, Okonkwo merits condemnation for killing his own adopted son especially because he did so for personal aggrandisement. They both are punished by the goddess, Ani, simultaneously through the single accident that claims the son of one and destroys the life-long ambition of the other. But however grave their punishments are, both men are not completely destroyed: Ezeudu dies before his son is killed. So he is spared the agony of burying a young son; he also has other sons and daughters who can continue to keep his lineage alive. Okonkwo is exiled for seven years after which period he is free to return. He is also blessed with a friend in Umuofia and an uncle in Mbanta who help him to endure the traumas of exile. He finally takes his own life because he never learns to control his inordinate ambition of becoming a lord when he returns from exile.

Until the coming of the white man, Umuofia community appears to be a stable society with adequate legal and moral codes which provide answers to their social and religious problems, namely: killing of one's

clansman, thievery, battering of women, and land disputes. The laws also have provisions for dealing with external aggression like the murdering of a clanswoman by an outsider. Strong men like Okonkwo and the local judiciary of 'masked spirits' known as *egwugwu*, who represent the founding fathers of the nine villages of Umuofia, are responsible for maintaining law and order in the clan. Their authority is never impugned; if anyone dares to challenge it, he is fought by warriors like Okonkwo. This is how Umuofia came to be known as *Umuofia obodo dike*.

With the settlement of the missionaries in Umuofia comes the first true test of its stability. In spite of its internal weaknesses, many citizens consider the missionaries' settlement as the beginning of the crumbling of that ill-fated society. The real challenge comes when Okonkwo is away in exile. When his friend Obierika tells him about the new religion, he inwardly believes that the missionaries are able to settle because his people 'have lost the power to fight' now that he is not present to give them leadership. Through his answer to Obierika's question, 'Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?' Okonkwo portrays himself as a general who would have provided the military leadership necessary to forestall the victory of the British force:

'I have heard', said Okonkwo. 'But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land.' (p. 159)

As soon as he returns from exile, he attempts to fight the missionaries the way he says he would; he leads the *egwugwu* which destroy Mr Smith's church building. Because he succeeds in persuading his people in the marketplace 'to do something substantial' even though 'they had not agreed to kill the missionary or drive away the Christians', Okonkwo once more feels like his old self:

For the first time in many years Okonkwo had a feeling that was akin to happiness. The times which had altered so unaccountably during his exile seemed to be coming round again. The clan which had turned false on him appeared to be making amends.... Okonkwo was almost happy again. (p. 173)

Almost *happy* indeed! For both his leadership and happiness are short-lived: when his violent challenge of the missionary and the native Christian converts is tested by the British Commissioner whose forces

destroyed Abame, and who now is involved in the present conflict, Okonkwo (with the other elders) becomes as weak and foolish as Abame people whom he earlier on condemned, despite his military preparedness of always wearing the machete and being on the alert. The court messengers arrest him and other elders on the orders of the British Commissioner, and humiliate them in the Commissioner's absence. Okonkwo chokes with hate. He blames others for failing to approve his plan of killing the white man before their arrests. He carries the hate home with him after their release. This is the first time that a man born of a woman has both challenged and humiliated him. So when he kills the head messenger, he does so with hate and as a personal revenge, not for a ritual purpose as he makes people believe when he kills Ikemefuna.

However, it is also true that some of Okonkwo's mistakes are made while he pursues some noble causes — fighting enemies of the clan. Most elders know that the advent of the white man in Umuofia made 'things fall apart' for their community. So they cry out for the removal of the shame. An example of this outcry is borne in the speech of one of the oldest members of Uchendu's *Umunna*:

'As for me, I have only a short while to live, and so have Uchendu and Unachukwu, and Emefo. But I fear for you young people because you do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan....' (p. 152)

That fear for the younger generation and for the fate of the clan is echoed later on in Umuofia by another old man:

'All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our own eyes.' '...No clan can boast of greater numbers or greater valour. But are we all here? ... Are all sons of Umuofia with us here? ... They are not.... They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland.... We must root out this evil.' (pp. 182-3)

Okonkwo seizes the call to arms as a welcome opportunity to demonstrate once more his patriotism and valour without discretion. He understands how to 'root out this evil' without regard to the danger that 'We shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman'. (p. 183) He runs that risk because the head messenger whom he kills is both a black man

and a fellow Igbo man from another clan. In other words, he kills a kinfolk for the third time. As before his act merits condemnation by both men and gods. 'He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape' (p. 184). But what finally kills his spirit and hastens his decision to take his own life is the voices of people asking, 'Why did he do it?' This time his act is condemned not just by a few people and in private as on the two previous occasions; it is condemned by the entire assembly of Umuofia men of valour and in a market place sacred to the people.

Okonkwo's death may have marked the passage of a great era in Umuofia, but his suicide is not a sacrifice to his great society. For neither the gods nor the people would consider suicide a form of sacrifice since suicide is an abomination in Igbo society. Okonkwo's death comes because he realizes that he has failed both the people and their goddess, Ani. Though he has the spirit to endure misfortunes such as the loss of his yams during the drought that hit Umuofia, the traumas of exile, and the humiliation of imprisonment, he does so with others. That is, in all three cases, the people are behind him. It is not the fear of what 'the white man whose power you know too well' might do that makes him commit suicide. Rather it is the recognition of the truth of the statement, 'It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails *alone*' (p. 23) — words of wisdom his father, who is considered an *agbala*, left with him before dying.

NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann AWS, London, 1967). All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
2. See Robert Fraser, 'A Note on Okonkwo's Suicide', *Kunapipi* 1/1 (1979, pp. 108-113).
3. *The Random House College Dictionary*, ed. Jess Stein (Random House Inc., New York, 1975), p. 1005.